
'Let the civilians leave', Akashi urges from LTTE

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We hope that even now the LTTE will change its attitude and let the IDPs in areas it still holds move to other areas, as several thousands of others had already done, Japan's special envoy for Peace Building, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, told a media briefing in Colombo on Saturday (May 2).

"It is heart-warming that people from the South of Sri Lanka, most of them Sinhalese, are collecting goods and money for the internally displaced people from the north. I hope this spirit of harmony and friendship will prevail in the future," he said. One of the major tragedies that led to the breakdown of the peace process in Sri Lanka was the LTTE's failure to attend the Tokyo Conference in 2003, for which it was invited, and which produced the Tokyo Declaration, which was a road map to peace in the country, he said. Commenting on conditions in the IDP transit centres, where he said they could be better, but for the sudden influx of several thousands within two weeks. The media briefing was held at the end of a busy schedule during which Akashi had a two and half hour meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa, where the focus of discussion was the humanitarian conditions regarding the IDPs and the government's military operations against the LTTE to eradicate terrorism. Akashi who had visited major IDP facility, said he was impressed by the commitment and dedicated efforts of the leaders of the relief operations to help ease the conditions of the people, and the good coordination and cooperation between the government departments and officials and the UN, UNHCR, UNICEF and other relief agencies. There were vocational training facilities already in place, education was provided to children, and some of the IDPs had even planted vegetable plots around their shelters. He was pleased that President Rajapaksa had attached great importance to the position that the solution to the problem in Sri Lanka was not military but political, and was firmly committed to ensuring that all the people of the country could live together in friendship and harmony.

Answering questions on reports of heavy armed attacks in the No Fire Zone, he said there were such reports, "but I do not know from where the firing was coming. There was no way of establishing the veracity of the various reports received." He expressed hope that the government will remain faithful to its policy of restraint and zero tolerance of casualties, and in keeping with its statement of April 27, restrict military action to self-defence and absolutely necessary action for humanitarian reasons. Questioned on conditions for Japanese bilateral aid to Sri Lanka if the current humanitarian military operations continue, Akashi said the Japanese policy on country aid was based on certain criteria for each country, for longer term development, although the situation could be reviewed in the future if the necessity arose for such review. With regard to the Co-Chairs, he said Japan did not agree with the view of the other Co-Chair members that economic assistance should be linked to success in the peace process. "Problems caused by the misjudgement of leaders, should not be used to punish the people," he said. Responding to another question whether Japan disagreed with the Western position on the need for a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities in Sri Lanka, he said the two matters had different political connotations, and he was not certain whether there was any such commonly agreed western position on the issue. He said the Japanese Cabinet had last week decided to give US\$ 4 million as aid to Sri Lanka specifically for non-food, water supply and other needs of the IDPs. He had been assured by President Rajapaksa that 80 percent of the present IDPs would be resettled in "by end December this year and there were constraints" with regard to the progress of de-mining operations, and the need to conform to international standards on resettlement, to which Sri Lanka was committed. Courtesy: Defence.lk